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ABSTRACT

In the wake of Alabama's new rules requiring multicultural education in teacher education programs, a study examined whether multicultural literature was actually being taught in all levels of education in the state, how it was being taught, and who was teaching it. The study covered English language arts classes throughout Alabama in levels K through college. Its central component was a 35-question survey (mostly multiple choice) mailed to about 669 teachers. Responses, which were amazingly similar across the board, were as follows: (1) there is strong consensus as to why multicultural literature should be taught (those reasons are numerous and are listed on an attached chart); (2) most do not believe that multicultural literature needs to be taught by a member of the represented minority group; (3) most have not been prevented from teaching multicultural literature by censorship or curriculum restrictions; (4) most believe multicultural literature increases knowledge of cultures and that students have a positive reaction; (5) most teachers spend from 5-25% of their time on multicultural literature in the classroom. More generally, 83% of the respondents agreed that multicultural literature should be taught because it encourages engagement with other cultures, but only 59% believed it encouraged the development of interpretative and evaluative skills. Further research should address this latter issue of multicultural literature's purpose in the classroom. (Attached are a definition of multiculturalism, a copy of the survey, and a chart summarizing results.) (TB)

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"Multicultural Literature: What Is It and How and Why Are We Teaching It?"

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Multicultural Literature: What Is It and How and Why Are We Teaching It?

When Mildred Taylor received the Newbery Award in 1977 for Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, she made the following comment in her acceptance speech: "If they [children of today and of the future] can identify with the Logans, who are representative not only of my family, but of the many Black families who faced adversity and survived, and understand the principles by which they lived, then perhaps they can better understand and respect themselves and others" (408). At that time, we were not talking about including multicultural literature in our schools, yet she offered a powerful rationale for doing so--it helps us to understand and respect ourselves and others.

Sixteen years after Taylor's acceptance speech, Arthur N. Applebee published the results of his research, Literature in the Secondary School. He found that instruction was dominated by the literary anthology, and that the curriculum emphasized traditional selections of British and American literature, with only slight attention to world literature, contemporary literature, minority literature, or selections by women. Following is a list of the most frequently taught book-length works in grades 9-12 in public schools:

Romeo and Juliet
Macbeth
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
Julius Caesar
To Kill a Mockingbird
The Scarlet Letter
Of Mice and Men
Hamlet
The Great Gatsby
Lord of the Flies

One of the ten books was written by a women; there is no minority literature (65).

I was wondering if the curriculum would ever really change when I received a copy of the new rules from the Alabama State Department of Education. These rules determine rather specifically the program for English Education students in colleges and universities throughout Alabama. Ten years ago the rules said that future English teachers had to have a knowledge of world, English, and American literature. When TSU is evaluated by the SDE in the fall of 1994, our English Education program must now indicate that our students will be knowledgeable not only of world, British, and American literature but also of women's and minority literature and literature for young adults. Future teachers will be prepared to teach a more diversified course in literature, but I began to wonder about the current situation in Alabama.

Was multicultural literature being taught, and what was the rationale for including or excluding it from the classroom?
How was it being taught?
Who was teaching it?
What authors were being read?

To begin to answer some of these questions, I conducted a survey of English and language arts classrooms throughout Alabama, K through College. The survey was handled by mail so my first task was developing a definition of multicultural literature so that all participants would have the same focus when completing the questionnaire. This may seem obvious, but I wanted to identify clearly just what literature should be included in the survey.

When I talked to my colleagues in the English Department, they would tell me "Oh, yes, I teach multicultural literature--I teach The Illiad and The Oddyssey and Proust." I assumed that they were joking, but I wanted the survey to clearly indicate that such traditional classics were not what I was talking about. Therefore, I struggled with the definition and you can see its evolution on your handout. (See attachment A)

DISCUSS DEFINITIONS

English faculty at Auburn University at Montgomery participated in a pilot study and commented on the definition and survey:

One had a problem with "traditionally taught literature." The instructor had included women and minorities for 25 years, but the questionnaire did not recognize this.

Another instructor could not complete the questionnaire because it assumed that the writer has not been teaching multicultural literature, and that is an incorrect assumption.

The final version of the questionnaire was mailed to the members of the two NCTE affiliates in Alabama:

Members of the Alabama Council of Teachers of English-- The Council includes English/language arts teachers K through college.	534
Members of the Association of College English Teachers of Alabama	108
Some held membership in both organizations	27
Total	669
Some questionnaires were returned because they could not be delivered.	6

DISCUSS SURVEY QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

SUMMARY (see attachment B)

First, I found amazingly similar responses across grade levels, K through college

Chart #1 Why are we teaching multicultural literature: what is the teacher's rationale for incorporating it into the classroom?

There was a strong concensus as to why multicultural literature should be included. (See numbers 1-5)
However, a fairly strong minority accepted the rationale for not including it. (See numbers 6-9)

Chart #2 What is the teacher's professional judgment?

Approximately 90% believe multicultural literature does not need to be taught by a member of the particular ethnic group, and it does not have to be written by a member of the group. (See numbers 11, 16)
Most agree that multicultural literature must meet high literary standards, and most have inccorporated multicultural literature into their classrooms. (See numbers 14, 19)

Chart #3 What are the out-of-class influences?

Most have not been prevented by censorship or curriculum restrictions from offering multicultural literature (see numbers 18, 31); but a smaller percentage have been encouraged to include it. (See number 17)

Chart #4 How is it incorporated into the classroom?
Multicultural literature is used most commonly as a source for discussion, writing, and required reading. (See numbers 27, 28, 26)
It is used less frequently in connection with media or as a source for independent reading. (See numbers 29, 25)

Chart #5 What are the perceived outcomes?

Most agree it increases knowledge of cultures and that students have a positive reaction. (See numbers 23, 30)
It less frequently seems to increase interest in reading, to develop empathy and tolerance, or to increase interpretation and evaluation abilities. (See 20, 24, 22)
Sixty-one% saw no increase in reading comprehension.

Chart #6 Where do teachers find multicultural literature?

Most teachers find selections in anthologies. (See number 33a.)

Chart #7 How much time do teachers spend on multicultural literature?

Most teachers spend between 5 and 25 percent of their time on multicultural literature. (See number 34 b.)

What are the implications of the findings of the research?

The most obvious implication is the meed more research:

First, in responding to number 4, 83% agreed that multicultural literature should be taught because it encourages engagement which encourages thinking skills.

But in responding to number 22, only 59% agreed that it encouraged the development of interpretation and evaluation skills.

Therefore, does multicultural literature encourage engagement and identification with the literature and, if so, does that lead to the critical thinking required for interpretation and evaluation of literature?

And second, does multicultural literature increase tolerance and understanding for others as Mildred Taylor proclaimed and as most of the survey participants agreed?

If you would like to use the survey in your state or region, please do so. I would be interested in receiving a copy of your findings and comparing it to Alabama.

Works Cited

Applebee, Arthur N. Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1993.

Taylor, Mildred. "Newbery Award Acceptance Speech." The Horn Book Horn Book Magazine 53 (1977) 401-409.

Attachment A

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What is multicultural literature?

GRANT: For the purpose of this survey, multicultural literature is defined as a literary work published during the 20th century which can be placed in one of the following categories:

1. Literature by an American author who is a member of a minority group (African-American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American) and who is writing about life within the minority culture.
2. Literature in translation which creates a portrait of life in another country and culture.

PILOT STUDY: For the purpose of this survey, multicultural literature is defined as a literary work which has not been traditionally taught in the English or language arts classroom and which can be placed in one of the following categories:

1. Literature by an American author who is a person of color (Hispanic Latino, Asian American, African-American, Native American, Pacific Islander) writing about life within the particular culture.
2. Literature which has been translated into English creating a portrait of life in another country and culture.

REVISION #1: For the purpose of this survey, multicultural literature is defined as a literary work taught in the English or language arts classroom which can be placed in one of the following categories:

1. Literature by an American author who is a person of color (Hispanic Latino, Asian American, African-American, Native American, Pacific Islander) writing about life within the particular culture.
2. Contemporary literature of other nations which has been translated into English creating a portrait of life in another country and culture.

REVISION #2: For the purpose of this survey, multicultural literature is defined as a literary work taught in the English or language arts classroom which can be placed in one of the following categories:

1. Literature by an American author who is a person of color (Hispanic Latino, Asian American, African-American, Native American, Pacific Islander) writing about life within the particular culture.
2. Literature of other nations, not traditionally taught in the English classroom, which has been translated into English creating a portrait of life in another country and culture.

Attachment B

Chart #1 Why are we teaching multicultural literature: what is the teacher's rationale for incorporating it into the classroom?

Survey Item	Total Response % Disagree	% Agree	K-12 % Disagree	% Agree	College % Disagree	% Agree
Should be inc						
1 Diverse pop	14	86	10	90	18	82
2 Appre & tol	14	86	14	86	13	87
3 Self esteem	17	83	13	87	20	80
4 Engagement	17	83	15	85	18	82
5 Good lit	20	80	19	81	21	79
Should not be inc						
6 Cultural	78	22	84	16	72	28
7 Lit stand	68	32	66	34	70	30
8 All people	52	48	55	45	51	49
9 Political	58	42	53	47	63	37

Chart #2 What is the teacher's professional judgment?

Survey Item	Total Response % Yes	% No	K-12 % Yes	% No	College % Yes	% No
10 Prepared	44	56	49	51	40	60
11 Teach memb	7	93	7	93	6	94
12 Separate	25	75	22	78	28	72
13 Integrated	79	21	85.5	14.5	72	28
14 Literary Stan	87	13	90	10	83.5	16.5
15 Omit classics	70	30	69	31	72	28
16 Author memb	10	90	9	91	11	89
19 Inc multi lit	94	6	98	2	91	9

Chart #3 What are the out-of-class influences?

Survey Item	Total Response % Yes	% No	K-12 % Yes	% No	College % Yes	% No
17 Encouraged	32	68	30	70	38	62
18 Prevented	8	92	11	89	4	96
31 Censorship	9	91	9	91	10	90

Chart #4 How is it incorporated into the classroom?

Survey Item	Total Response % Yes	% No	K-12 % Yes	% No	College % Yes	% No
25 Self select	61	39	65	35	54	46
26 Required rd	85	15	78.5	21.5	93	7
27 Discussion	96	4	95	5	97	3
28 Writing	89	11	84	16	95	5
29 Media	67	33	73	27	58	42

Chart #5 What are the perceived outcomes?

Survey Item	Total Response % Yes	% No	K-12 % Yes	% No	College % Yes	% No
20 Interest	70	30	70	30	70	30
21 Comprehension	39	61	47	53	27	73
22 Interp & eval	59	41	63.5	36.5	52	48
23 Other cultures	94	6	93	7	97	3
24 Empathy & tol	84	16	83	17	86	14
30 Positive reac	95	5	98	3	91	9

Chart #6 Where do teachers find multicultural literature?

Survey item	Total Response % of 1st choice	K-12 % of 1st choice	College % of 1st choice
33 Sources			
a Anthologies	68	59	79
b Supplemental	18	23	13
c Printed	9	10	6
d Other	5	8	2

Chart #7 How much time do teachers spend on multicultural literature?

Survey item	Total Response % of time	K-12 % of time	College % of time
34 Time			
a Less than 5	15	24	3
b 5-25	64	58	71
c 26-50	17	17	18
d 51-75	2	0	5
e 76-100	2	1	3

Dr. Mary Ann Tighe
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Multicultural Literature in the English/Language Arts Classroom

For the purpose of this survey, multicultural literature is defined as a literary work taught in the English or language arts classroom which can be placed in one of the following categories:

1. Literature by an American author who is a person of color (Hispanic Latino, Asian American, African American, Native American, Pacific Islander) writing about life within the particular culture.

2. Literature of other nations (a) which has been translated into English creating a portrait of life in another country and culture and (b) which is not part of the traditional canon in the English classroom or the traditional curriculum in the language arts classroom.

Part A Circle the appropriate response.

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree, NA = not applicable

Multicultural literature should be incorporated into the English curriculum--

1	2	3	4	NA	1)	because our literature should reflect our increasingly diverse population.
1	2	3	4	NA	2)	because it helps diverse groups to develop appreciation and tolerance for each other.
1	2	3	4	NA	3)	because it raises the self esteem of the various ethnic groups.
1	2	3	4	NA	4)	because it encourages engagement with the literature and such engagement encourages thinking skills.
1	2	3	4	NA	5)	because much good literature which is worthy of study has been omitted from our classrooms.

Multicultural literature should not be incorporated into the English curriculum--

1	2	3	4	NA	6)	because students need a common cultural heritage which can be ensured through a traditional literary canon.
1	2	3	4	NA	7)	because many works which are classified as multicultural literature do not meet the literary standards required for classroom study.
1	2	3	4	NA	8)	because traditional/classical literature reflects themes of enduring interest to all people regardless of race or ethnic heritage.
1	2	3	4	NA	9)	because multicultural literature has been or may be used for political rather than educational goals.

Part B Circle the appropriate response. 1 = Yes 2 = No

1	2	10)	I feel knowledgeable and well prepared to teach multicultural literature.
1	2	11)	Multicultural literature should be taught by members of the particular ethnic group described in the literature.
1	2	12)	Multicultural literature should be offered in separate literature courses or units of study.
1	2	13)	Multicultural literature should be integrated into all literature courses or units of study.
1	2	14)	Multicultural literature should be judged by the same literary standards as all other works studied in the English classroom.
1	2	15)	Multicultural literature should be included in the curriculum even if some traditional/classical literature must be omitted.
1	2	16)	Only that literature written by a member of the particular ethnic group described in the work may be considered as multicultural literature.
1	2	17)	I have been encouraged by administrators and/or parents to incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum.
1	2	18)	I am prevented by course or curriculum requirements from offering multicultural literature in my classroom.
1	2	19)	I have incorporated multicultural literature into at least one course or class over the last one to five years.

If you do not include multicultural literature in your classes/ courses, omit Parts C and D and complete Part E.

If you do include multicultural literature in one or more classes/ courses, complete Parts C, D, and E. When completing Parts C and D, please identify the specific grade or course that will be guiding your response for this part of the survey. Check one of the following categories as the basis for your answers.

a) _____ Grade (identify specific grade level K through 12) _____
b) _____ General Studies college English course (identify course number and title) _____
c) _____ Upper level college English course for undergraduates (identify course number and title)_____

Part C Circle the appropriate response. 1 = Yes 2 = No

1	2	20)	Multicultural literature has increased student interest in reading.
1	2	21)	Multicultural literature has increased reading comprehension skills.
1	2	22)	Multicultural literature has increased literary interpretation and evaluation skills.
1	2	23)	Multicultural literature has increased student knowledge of other cultures.
1	2	24)	Multicultural literature has increased student empathy and tolerance for other cultures.

1	2	25)	Multicultural literature is used as a source for self-selected or independent reading.
1	2	26)	Multicultural literature is used as a source for required readings.
1	2	27)	Multicultural literature is used as a source for discussion.
1	2	28)	Multicultural literature is used as a source for writing.
1	2	29)	Multicultural literature is studied in conjunction with other media.
1	2	30)	Overall, students have had a positive reaction to multicultural literature in the classroom.
1	2	31)	I have had censorship problems or negative community response while teaching multicultural literature.

Part D

32) List the multicultural authors and titles most frequently included in your course or class.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

33) Identify the sources of multicultural literature in your classroom by ranking the following items with #1 being the most common source.

a) _____ anthologies
b) _____ supplementary texts
c) _____ printed (Xeroxed) copies
d) _____ other (please identify) _____

34) Based on total class time which focuses on literature, estimate the proportion of that time which is focused on multicultural literature. (Check one response.)

a) ____ Less than 5%
b) ____ 5-25%
c) ____ 26-50%
d) ____ 51-75%
e) ____ 76-100%

Part E

35) What is your response to the concept of incorporating multicultural literature into your classroom? What are your comments in regard to the issues raised in this questionnaire? Please comment on the back of this page.